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Soviet lasers could kil... U.S. satellites, CIA says

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WASHINGTON — In rare public testimony on Soviet military forces, the Central Intelligence Agency said yesterday that Moscow may have reached the point where it now could build huge ground-based lasers to destroy American satellites.

The agency described an across-the-board expansion of Soviet offensive and defensive forces that included at least seven new ballistic missiles, a new jet bomber, projected deployment of up to 3,000 cruise missiles and production lines that could turn out missile interceptors for countrywide missile defenses.

By 1990, the CIA said, the Soviet arsenal of nuclear warheads for missiles and bombers will grow to more than 12,000, compared with 9,000 today, and there could be between 16,000 and 21,000 in the mid-1990s.

(According to John Collins, senior national defense specialist at the Library of Congress, the United States had 7,474 ballistic missile warheads and an estimated 3,296 bomber-carried nuclear weapons at the start of this year.)

The CIA's extraordinary public assessment was given before subcommittees of the Senate Appropriations and Armed Services Committees by Robert M. Gates, deputy director for intelligence, and Lawrence K. Gershwin, specialist on Soviet strategic weapons.

Earth-circling satellites have become vital elements of U.S. military strength, used for spying, warning of missile attack, communications, navigation and weather observation. The CIA testimony said the Soviet Union aimed to deny such uses of space in wartime but so far had limited anti-satellite (ASAT) capabilities.

The officials said, however, that there now are two high energy lasers at the Saryshagan test range with "the potential to destroy or interfere with some satellites in near-earth orbit."

Describing extensive work on directed energy weapons — lasers and atomic particle beams — they said: "We are concerned that Soviet directed energy programs may have proceeded to the point where they could construct operational ground-based ASAT weapons."

The United States is far from that stage, according to officials in the Strategic Defense Initiative, or "star wars," program. There is one U.S. high energy laser, at White Sands, N.M., which has the power potential of a weapon. But, unlike the Soviet developments, it does not have an installed beam director that could focus the "shooter" part on a target.

The CIA said the Soviets also could test a space-based laser in low orbit in the early 1990s.

A prime mover for yesterday's open hearing was Senator James A. McClure (R, Idaho), a conservative opposed to defense budget cuts. The session brought a brief protest from Senator Gary Hart (D, Colo.) against disclosing parts of the national intelligence estimate to make what might be "partisan points." Intelligence agents should be "insulated" from public controversy, he said.

Senator Ted Stevens (R, Alaska), chairing the joint hearing, said Congress had been secretly hearing the CIA material all year. The Soviets "know we know," he said, and only the U.S. public was left out.

The CIA officials testified that they saw no sign that severe economic conditions would force the Soviets to forgo strategic weapons programs or that they would make "substantial concessions" in arms control negotiations to relieve economic burdens.

While they described a mammoth Soviet military program, the CIA witnesses also said that Soviet power had its limits:

☐ Despite expanding air defenses, the Soviets could not turn back a U.S. combined bomber and cruise missile attack. Over the next 10 years, they would be unable to prevent "largescale damage" from such an attack, though they would be increasingly able to defend military and industrial installations.

☐ "We do not believe there is a realistic possibility that the Soviets will be able to deploy in the 1990s a system that could pose any significant threat to the U.S. SSBNs (nuclear-powered missile carrying submarines) on patrol."

☐ "By their actions and propaganda, the Soviets have demonstrated they are very concerned about the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative and its focus on advanced technology." They view this as forcing them to redirect their costly missile program to reduce vulnerabilities or to engage in a losing high-technology race.

They said Moscow would replace pratically all its current missile and bomber force with new weapons by the mid-1990s.

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